

A Gnostic Icarus? Traces of the Controversy Between Plotinus and the Gnostics Over a Surprising Source for the Fall of Sophia: The Pseudo-Platonic *2nd Letter*

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Abstract

In several iterations of the Gnostic ontogenetic myth, we find variations on an intriguing notion: namely, that the first rupture in the otherwise eternal and continuous procession of ‘aeons’ in the divine ‘pleroma’ is caused by a *cognitive overreach and failure* (the “fall of Sophia”). As much as it might contain a distant echo of certain myths concerning hubris in the classical tradition or in biblical literature, this general schema of *cognitive overreach—cognitive failure—fall* has no obvious parallel in Greek philosophy prior to Plotinus, in some of whose more pessimistic accounts of hypostatic procession we find a similar schema, in which the generation of each ontological stratum occurs as the result of a cognitive failure on the superjacent level. If Plotinus borrowed this schema from the Gnostics, one might ask how the latter came up with it in the first place. In response, this paper makes the following three points. [1] Gnostic thinkers ultimately derived this schema from a particular juxtaposition of two profoundly aporetic Platonic passages referring to the travails of the individual soul, one certainly genuine (the description of the unexplained but catastrophic fall of the soul that fails to follow the heavenly train of the gods through the intelligible realm at *Phaedrus* 248c2-d3), the other quite possibly spurious (the claim that the cause of all evils is the desire, and the failure, of the soul to understand the nature of the notoriously enigmatic ‘King,’ ‘Second,’ and ‘Third,’ at *2nd Letter* 312e1-313a6). [2] The Platonizing Sethian Gnostics closest to Plotinus also employed this latter source text to justify their conception of the *individual* soul, whose vicissitudes were understood to parallel those of Sophia. [3] This hypothesis is confirmed by evidence of tacit anti-Gnostic argumentation alluding to the *2nd Letter* throughout Plotinus’ oeuvre.

Keywords

Plotinus – Gnosticism – Sophia – Pseudo-Platonic *2nd Letter* – the ‘Three Kings’ – Platonizing Sethianism – Valentinianism

1. Before addressing the principal thesis of this paper, a brief summary of the background is necessary. It has long been remarked that certain Plotinian passages describing the generative activity of Soul evoke a curious pessimism or even *failure* that is seemingly in tension with Plotinus’ axiomatic insistence elsewhere upon the perfection of the intelligible realm and the fundamental excellence of the cosmos.¹ In the case of the individual soul, Plotinus often describes the descent into the body as an audacious² voluntary externalization or even a downward ‘leap.’³ In the case of the cosmic Soul, however, Plotinus occasionally describes its generative activity rather to be the result of an abortive attempt to revert successfully upon, and assimilate itself to, its source (namely, the Intellect): in other words, it is a matter of a *failed striving towards the superior*.⁴ That Plotinus should occasionally describe the generative activity of soul, even cosmic Soul, in less-than-glowing terms, should not be terribly surprising, given the ambivalence inherent in the Soul’s role as mediator

1 See, for instance, the remark of H. Jonas (1971) 332: “Plotinus cannot make do without the same language of apostasy and fall for which he takes the Gnostics so severely to task.” Also H.-Ch. Puech (1960), esp. “Discussion,” 184-185; A. H. Armstrong (1967) 243-245.

2 It is often remarked that on certain occasions Plotinus uses the term *tolma* and its cognates—a term with distinct Gnostic connotations, applied to Sophia’s cognitive overreach at Irenaeus *Adv. Haer.* I.1.2.19 [Rousseau-Dutreleau vol. 1. pp. 38-39]—to describe not only the soul’s search after first principles, VI.9[9].10.13 and VI.8[39].1.8, but also procession itself: at VI.9[9].5.29, of the *Nous* from the One; at V.1[10].1.4; VI.7[38].21.25, of the individual soul; at V.2[11].2.6, the vegetative part of individual soul, and at III.6[24].14.8, of matter. Important discussions of the somewhat different uses of *tolma* in Gnostic and Pythagorean interpretation occur in (*inter alia*) A. H. Armstrong (1967), N. Baladi (1971), M. Atkinson (1983), and N. Torchia (1993). As M. Atkinson (1983), 4-6, points out most clearly, Pythagoreans supposedly associated the Indefinite Dyad with *tolma* for its downward movement and separation *away* from the monad (e.g., Anatolius *apud* Iamblichus *Theol. Arith.* 9.5 De Falco), while the Valentinians applied it to Sophia’s audacious but futile upward movement *towards* the unknowable Father.

3 E.g. IV.8[6].4.1-23; V.1[10].1.1-6; IV.3[27].6.24-27, 12.1-2, 13.17-20; 15.1-7; IV.4[28].3.1-3. On the significance of the *voluntary* nature of the soul’s descent, see O’Brien (1977), who argues that this does not preclude it also being *necessary*, i.e., divinely sent, as at IV.8[6].5, which would thus exculpate it from complicity in evil.

4 See Endnote 1.

between the immutability of Intellect and the ever-changing physical world. However, somewhat more jarring examples of this kind of abortive upward striving also occur in Plotinus' accounts of the emergence of *Nous* itself from the One, which suggests that this model is not unique to the problematic of the Soul, but rather is inherent *in the very structure of procession itself*. For just as the Soul unfolds from Intellect as that aspect of the latter that strives, but is unable, to remain absolutely dispassionate (ἀπαθής), Plotinus occasionally suggests that the emergent Intellect itself tries but fails to attain the transcendent unity of the One.⁵

2. It thus appears that beneath Plotinus' more frequent descriptions of the dynamic aspect of procession in more optimistic terms—in which a certain indefinite power emitted by each hypostasis reverts upon its source, to the best of its ability, so as to receive definition and thus acquire independent subsistence⁶—there lurks another, darker model which is at odds with his more explicit doctrine. This alternate model involves a particular kind of (what one might consider) 'tragic hubris': a *cognitive overreach* and *failure* that apparently causes each emergent hypostasis to proceed forth, or, rather, to *fall down onto*, and thus generate, a subjacent ontological stratum.

3. At this point one might inquire how Plotinus arrived at his pessimistic model of ontogenesis, since it is, as far as one can determine, unknown in prior academic Platonism. It is therefore intriguing that a very similar schema—involving [i] cognitive *overreach*, [ii] cognitive *failure*, and [iii] an ensuing spatio-ontological or moral *decline*—occurs more or less prominently, and under variously opaque layers of mythologization, in several contemporaneous Gnostic systems, including those against which Plotinus polemicizes in his explicitly anti-Gnostic treatise, 11.9[33]. In Gnostic sources dating from as early as the mid 2nd century CE, we encounter the notion that the first rupture in the otherwise eternal and continuous procession of aeons from a (strictly speaking) "unknowable" first principle occurs when a subsidiary principle attempts and fails to know and/or to attain its unknowable progenitor; this primordial failure thus becomes the ultimate origin of evil.

4. To be more precise, in several Gnostic accounts of ontogenesis, the Second principle—usually a noetic principle of some sort—emerges from the First as an exteriorization and crystallization of the latter's own reflexive

⁵ See Endnote 2.

⁶ This schema occurs especially in v.1[10].6-7 and v.2[11].1-2, but evidence of the same schema can be found in v.1.7[38].15-16, superimposed over the pessimistic model in the same chapters.

self-apprehension.⁷ In turn, a third stratum of entities—‘aeons’—unfolds through a similar process of generative contemplation. The last principle to emerge among those on the 3rd stratum—usually Sophia, “Wisdom”—desires to comprehend her ultimate source, and she therefore undertakes a noble but ultimately futile attempt to comprehend and/or reunite with the First principle; for only the Second principle is able to apprehend, in some way, the unknowable First. Sophia fails to attain the First principle on account of the vast ontological gulf between the first and the third strata, and consequently experiences a moral or emotional crisis that introduces the first element of imperfection—the ultimate provenance of all evil—into the system. In the ‘classic’ Sethianism of the *Apocryphon of John*,⁸ the process is envisioned in embryological terms; Sophia’s fruitless search for her ultimate progenitor, and thus her inability to conjoin with him, leads to a reproductive failure. Her attempt to procreate in the absence of a (male) consort, and without the agreement of her ultimate forefather, causes her to conceive a horribly malformed foetus; she gives birth to the theriomorphic demiurge Yaldabaoth, who is ultimately responsible for the creation of the material world. In typical Valentinianism, Sophia’s anguish resulting from her cognitive failure leads to her experience of the primordial ‘passions,’ which further results in [a] her fall and expulsion from the Pleroma,⁹ and [b] the emergence of the elements of matter, coextensive with evil, as crystallizations of Sophia’s various passions, elements from which the mediocre Demiurge later fashions the cosmos. In either case, in this ingenious schema, the superior principles are absolved of responsibility for evil, which emerges only as a by-product of the First principle’s own transcendence. [See diagram in **Figure 1** below].

5. Elsewhere¹⁰ I have argued that [i] *both* of Plotinus’ models of procession—optimistic and pessimistic—may only be fully understood in a Gnostic context,¹¹ whence, I suspect, he ultimately derived them, and that [ii] he

7 In Sethian or “Barbeloite”-type systems, respectively [1] the “Invisible Spirit” or simply the “Unknowable” and [2] usually Barbelo; in Valentinian systems, usually [1] “Forefather” or *Bythos* (the “Deep”) and [2] *Nous*.

8 A Sethian example: *Apocryphon of John* (NHC III,1) 14.9-15.16 (short recension); Valentinian examples: Irenaeus *Aversus Haereses* 2.13-3.13 [=Rousseau-Doutreleau, vol. 1, pp. 38-43]; *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5). 77.11-25; Tertullian *Adversus Valentinianos* 9.1-3; *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I,3) 16.4-20; Clement of Alexandria *Excerpta ex Theodoto*. 31.3 [Sagnard].

9 Or sometimes this is said to result in the emergence of a ‘lower’ Sophia named “Achamoth” (also referred to as Sophia’s ἐνθύμησις or “inherent conception”) who is extruded from the Pleroma while the higher Sophia remains above.

10 See Z. Mazur (2005), 104-107.

11 This underlying Gnostic background takes a form that is both *positive*, as in certain conceptual structures tacitly undergirding Plotinus’ thought that he possibly derived from an

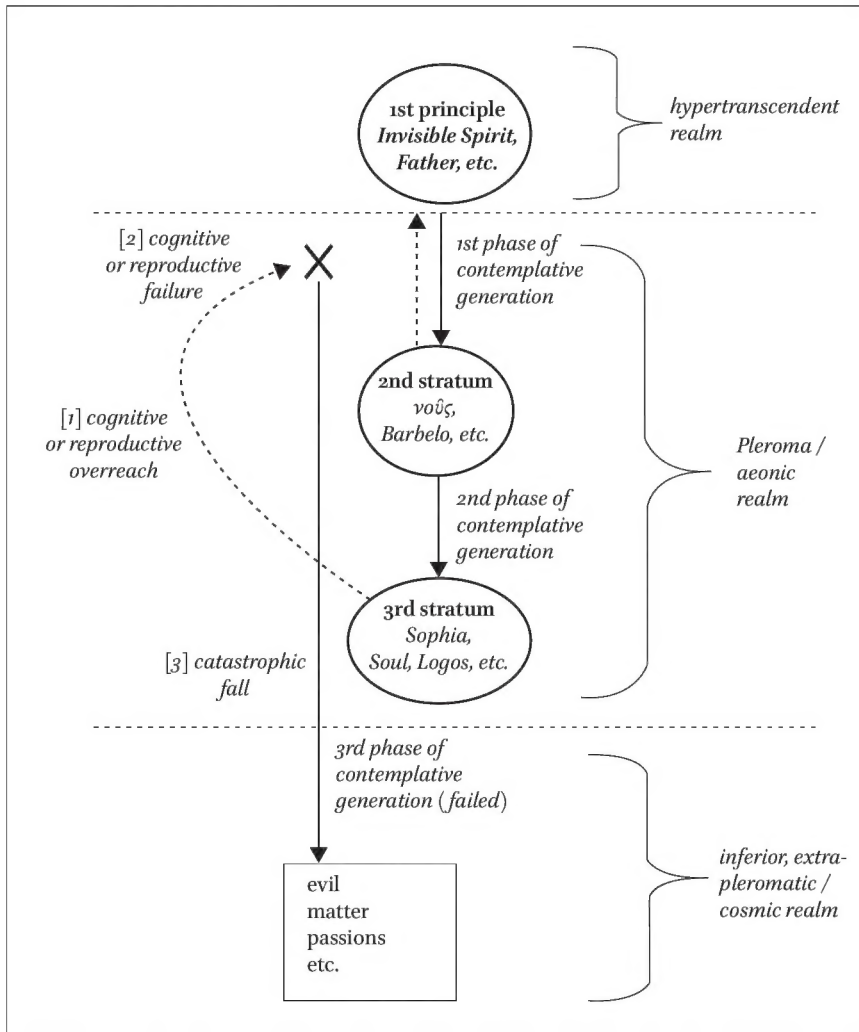


FIGURE 1 Generalized schema of emergence of evil as the result of cognitive or reproductive overreach and failure according to several Gnostic systems.

nevertheless adapts and corrects them in certain philosophically significant respects.¹² What I would like to emphasize here, however, concerns only a

Alexandrian Gnostic educational background, as well as *negative*, in the sense of certain ideas occurring in treatises outside of his more or less explicitly anti-Gnostic tetralogy that he nevertheless developed in reaction against certain Gnostic ideas most in conflict with his understanding of Platonism.

¹² See Endnote 3.

single aspect of Plotinus' pessimistic model of procession through cognitive overreach and failure: specifically, the imputation to the otherwise impassive hypostases of what amounts, in his system, to an 'illegal' emotional life, consisting of *will* and a kind of *thwarted desire* for their superiors, something that would seem more suitable to his understanding of the individual human soul.¹³ Indeed, despite arguments throughout his oeuvre—most importantly in III.6[26]—for the necessarily impassive (ἀπαθής) nature of incorporeal entities, Plotinus himself often seems to be on the verge of conceding that the cosmic Soul experiences passion of some kind,¹⁴ which suggests the profound influence this Gnostic notion had upon his thought.

6. Thus far only the preamble. I would now like to pose the central question to be addressed in this paper. If it is correct that Plotinus derived the model of procession through cognitive overreach and failure from the Gnostics, then one might reasonably wonder how the Gnostics themselves came up with it in the first place.¹⁵ For as much as this general schema might contain a faint echo of certain myths concerning tragic hubris in the classical tradition (such as the falls of Icarus or Phaethon) or in biblical literature (such as the literal fall of Simon Magus or even the figurative 'fall' of Adam and Eve), its specifically *epistemological* aspect has no obvious parallel in Greek philosophy prior to Plotinus. Indeed, how, in a classical Greek philosophical context, could the cosmic Soul, let alone the divine Intellect itself, experience a cognitive failure of any sort?

7. In what follows, I would like to suggest that one compelling antecedent for this conception may be found, precisely as Plotinus complains—and as with so many other aspects of Gnostic thought—in a passage of Plato. Elsewhere¹⁶ I have made the case that a section of the Platonizing Sethian Gnostic treatise *Zostrianos* (*NHC* VIII,1), pp. 44-46, describing individual eschatology and the postmortem vicissitudes of the disincarnate soul, is based largely on *Phaedrus* 248a-d, a Platonic passage which describes the cyclical reincarnations and fall into a body (i.e., the transmigratory coming-to-birth) of the *individual* human soul which is unable to follow in the train of its tutelary deity on its (as it were)

13 Note the language: ὀρεξίς προσλάβη, βουλομένη, θέλων, and so on.

14 See **Endnote 4**.

15 The inquiry into the origin of the myth of Sophia has, of course, long been debated in the scholarship on Gnosticism; see especially G. MacRae (1970); J. Goehring (1981); J.-D. Dubois (2010). I do not wish to reject *in toto* the various hypotheses that have previously been suggested; no single tributary should completely exclude the possibility of significant contributions from other sources.

16 Z. Mazur, "Traces of the Competition," (forthcoming).

‘guided tour’ of the intelligible realm. Yet if this thesis is correct, one might reasonably suspect that Plato’s language of striving, cognitive failure, and catastrophic fall in this same *Phaedrus* passage lies somewhere behind the Gnostic myth of the fall of Sophia herself: thus, “*longing to follow that which is above, but unable to do so*, (souls) are carried around in the revolution, below the surface”;¹⁷ or, equivalently, “when a soul that is *unable to follow*, does not see, and, subject to some chance occurrence, *is filled with forgetting and evil*, it is weighted down, and ‘molts its feathers,’ and *falls down to earth . . .*”.¹⁸ It is therefore conceivable that certain Gnostic thinkers could have extrapolated from this doctrine to arrive at an analogous mythical narrative of the fall of Sophia (whom Plotinus, at least, identifies with the cosmic Soul).¹⁹ Indeed, we may find corroboration in Plotinus himself, who, in the course of treatise 11.9[33], complains that the Gnostics [a] plagiarize from Plato the doctrine of metempsychosis of the individual soul (of a sort that certainly occurs in the *Phaedrus* among other dialogues);²⁰ [b] claim that the cosmic Soul “molts” (πτερορρυσεῖν) when it creates the cosmos²¹ (which is a clear reference to *Phaedrus* 246c); and finally, [c] “identify the Demiurge with the Soul and attribute to the soul of the All the same passions as the souls in [individual] parts (i.e., individual souls).”²² Ironically, of course, we have seen that Plotinus himself is, on occasion, guilty of the same attribution.

8. And yet, while it appears incontrovertible that the account of the travails of the individual soul in the *Phaedrus* must have lurked somewhere in the background of the various Gnostic accounts of the fall of Sophia, another, less well known, Platonic passage appears to foreshadow the theme of cognitive

17 Plato *Phaedrus* 248a6-8: αἱ δὲ δὴ ἄλλαι γλιχόμεναι μὲν ἅπασαι τοῦ ἄνω ἔπονται, ἀδυνατοῦσαι δέ, ὑποβρύχια συμπεριφέρονται.

18 Plato *Phaedrus* 248c5-8: ὅταν δὲ ἀδυνατήσασα ἐπισπείσθαι μὴ ἴδῃ, καὶ τινι συντυχίᾳ χρησαμένη λήθῃς τε καὶ κακίας πλησθεῖσα βαρυνθῇ, βαρυνθεῖσα δὲ πτερορρυήσῃ τε καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν πέσῃ.

19 Plot. 11.9[33].10.19-23.

20 11.9[33].6.10-19: “Ὅλως γάρ τὰ μὲν αὐτοῖς παρὰ τοῦ Πλάτωνος εἰληπται, τὰ δέ, ὅσα αἰνοτομοῦσιν, ἵνα ἰδῶν φιλοσοφίαν θῶνται, ταῦτα ἔξω τῆς ἀληθείας εὕρηται. Ἐπεὶ καὶ αἱ δίκαι καὶ οἱ ποταμοὶ οἱ ἐν Ἀΐδου καὶ αἱ μετενσωματώσεις ἐκείθεν. Καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν νοητῶν δὲ πλήθος ποιῆσαι, τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸν νοῦν καὶ τὸν δημιουργὸν ἄλλον καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν, ἐκ τῶν ἐν τῷ Τιμαίῳ λεχθέντων εἰληπται· εἰπόντος γάρ αὐτοῦ « ἥπερ οὖν νοῦς ἐνοῦσας ιδέας ἐν τῷ ὃ ἔστι ζῶον καθορᾶ, τοσαύτας καὶ ὁ τόδε ποιῶν τὸ πᾶν διενόηθη σχεῖν ».

21 11.9[33].4.1-2. Εἰ δὲ οἷον πτερορρυήσασαν τὴν ψυχὴν φήσουσι πεποιηκέναι, οὐχ ἡ τοῦ παντὸς τοῦτο πάσχει.

22 Plotinus 11.9[33].6.61-62: εἰς ταῦτὸν ἄγοντες τὸν δημιουργὸν τῇ ψυχῇ καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ πάθη διδόντες, ἅπερ καὶ τοῖς ἐν μέρει.

overreach and failure somewhat more precisely.²³ This passage occurs in the presumably spurious and Neopythagorean²⁴ *2nd Letter* of Plato, immediately following the famous passage about the so-called “Three Kings” (312e1-4) to which Plotinus himself often alludes, throughout his corpus, in support of his doctrine of three principal hypostases. The immediate context of the passage in question is ‘Plato’s’ response to Dionysius II of Syracuse who apparently has complained that he has not yet received satisfactory teachings about the First principles. Pseudo-Plato therefore begrudgingly reveals to Dionysius a putative esoteric doctrine of three enigmatic first principles, which he riddlingly terms the “King of All,” the “Second,” and the “Third.”²⁵ In the surprisingly neglected²⁶ lines immediately following this oft-quoted passage, pseudo-Plato insists that the human soul strives to comprehend these three ineffable principles on the basis of comparison to things that are similar to the soul itself, but necessarily fails because it has insufficient kinship with them.²⁷ Remarkably, he insists that it is the soul’s futile search after the nature of the first principles—specifically, the inquiry about their kind (ποῖόν τι)—that is the ultimate cause of all evil:

23 [Note omitted for anonymity].

24 See Rist (1965).

25 See the entirety of the notorious earlier portion of the passage, Plato *Letter 2* 312d5-e4 [text from J. Burnet, *Platonis opera*, vol. 5. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907]: φῆς γὰρ δὴ κατὰ τὸν ἐκείνου λόγον, οὐχ ἱκανῶς ἀποδεδείχθαι σοι περὶ τῆς τοῦ πρώτου φύσεως. φραστέον δὴ σοι δι’ αἰνιγμῶν, ἵν’ ἂν τι ἡ δέλτος ἢ πόντος ἢ γῆς ἐν πτυχαῖς πάθῃ, ὁ ἀναγνούς μὴ γνῶ. ὦδε γὰρ ἔχει. περὶ τὸν πάντων βασιλέα πάντ’ ἐστὶ καὶ ἐκείνου ἕνεκα πάντα, καὶ ἐκεῖνο αἴτιον ἀπάντων τῶν καλῶν· δεύτερον δὲ πέρι τὰ δεύτερα, καὶ τρίτον πέρι τὰ τρίτα. / “For according to his account, you say that the [doctrine] concerning the nature of the ‘First’ has not been sufficiently demonstrated to you. It must only be expressed to you through riddles, so that if the tablet suffers some harm on earth or sea, the reader should not understand. For it is as follows: around the King of All are all things, and all things are on account of him, and he is the cause of all the beauties; and the second things are around the Second; and the third things are around the Third.”

26 Neglected, that is, by both ancient and modern commentators. For all the attention given to the opening of the passage concerning the so-called Three Kings, it is remarkable that this latter part of the passage, with its strikingly pessimistic epistemological ethics, has not received the attention it merits. Among post-Plotinian Platonists, only Proclus (*Platonic Theology* 11.8, pp. 55.20–56.5 Saffrey-Westerink), cites the passage about πάντων αἰτίον ἐστὶν κακῶν explicitly; he interprets it merely as an emphatic warning that the soul’s hyperactive (πολυπραγμοσύνη) nature separates it from the transcendent Good.

27 This evidently appeals to the venerable Empedoclean epistemological doctrine of ‘like knows like’ (Empedocles fr. B109 D-K = Aristotle *De Anima* 404b12–15).

And so the human soul yearns (ὀρέγεται) to learn about these things, of what sort they are, by looking towards those things that are akin (συγγενή) to her, while none of them have sufficient [kinship]. The very King about which I spoke is not of the same kind (τοιούτων) [as the soul]. After this, then, the soul says, “but of what kind (ποῖόν τι) is it, really?” This is, O son of Dionysius and Doris, the question which is the cause of all evils (ὃ πάντων αἰτιόν ἐστιν κακῶν); or rather, it is concerning this [question] that birth-pangs are born in the soul; and unless one should extricate oneself from it, one will never really attain the truth.²⁸

9. Setting aside the question of the actual intention of the pseudonymous author, several elements suggest that this passage is a significant antecedent of the Gnostic schema of cognitive overreach and failure. Unlike the *Phaedrus* myth, in which the proximate cause of the failure of the soul to follow its tutelary god in the intelligible remains unexplained—since, in theory, any soul can apprehend the Forms, and Plato says one fails only “due to a chance occurrence” (τινὶ συντυχίᾳ)—this passage from the *2nd Letter* provides a rationale for the fall: the fall is entailed by the soul’s own hubristic seeking and cognitive overreach. As in the Gnostic schema, the overreach aspires specifically to those ineffable first principles that completely transcend ordinary intellection. Moreover, although the author’s intention was probably to proscribe the unhealthy curiosity of an individual seeker, the text of the letter states quite literally that the cognitive failure is the *cause of all evils*,²⁹ and also the cause of evil in the soul itself, described with the suggestive embryological language of birth-pangs and parturition (ὥδῃς ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐγγιγνομένη), which foreshadows the theme of the generation of evil in terms of congenital malformation that we find in the classic Sethian myth. Finally, this terminology of disturbance within the soul, while not strictly speaking identical, is nevertheless suggestive of the passion which Sophia is said to experience in the Valentinian schema. I would suggest, therefore, that this passage was of profound importance for

28 Ps.-Plato *2nd Letter* 212e4-313a6 [Burnet *op. cit.*]: ἡ οὖν ἀνθρωπίνη ψυχὴ περὶ αὐτὰ ὀρέγεται μαθεῖν ποῖ ἅττα ἐστίν, βλέπουσα εἰς τὰ αὐτῆς συγγενή, ὧν οὐδὲν ἱκανῶς ἔχει. τοῦ δὲ βασιλέως πέρι καὶ ὧν εἶπον, οὐδὲν ἐστὶν τοιούτων—τὸ δὲ μετὰ τοῦτο ἡ ψυχὴ φησιν—ἀλλὰ ποῖόν τι μὴν; τοῦτ’ ἐστίν, ὦ παῖ Διονυσίου καὶ Δωρίδος, τὸ ἐρώτημα ὃ πάντων αἰτιόν ἐστιν κακῶν, μᾶλλον δὲ ἡ περὶ τούτου ὥδῃς ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ ἐγγιγνομένη, ἣν εἰ μὴ τις ἐξαίρεθῇσεται, τῆς ἀληθείας ὄντως οὐ μὴ ποτε τύχη.

29 The literal force of this statement is somewhat mitigated, however, by the vaguely adversative μᾶλλον δὲ that follows; but this subtlety would not be a concern of an exegete determined to find in this passage an explication of cosmic evil.

the development of the various Gnostic ontogenetic schemata involving cognitive failure. Gnostic exegetes seem to have transposed this account to the divine soul so as to explain the emergence of evil itself.

10. Certainly, the precise mechanism by which this pseudo-Platonic passage might have come to influence the principal Gnostic systems remains obscure; but that Gnostic thinkers of the 2nd century would have been familiar with the *2nd Letter* is virtually incontrovertible.³⁰ The pseudo-Platonic ‘King of the All’ was a recurrent topos—according to Dörrie, a Platonic “Schlüsselwort”³¹—among both Christian³² and pagan Middle Platonists³³ contemporaneous with, and in intellectual proximity to, the development of the principal Sethian and Valentinian systems. Moreover, in his *Refutation of all Heresies*, Hippolytus quotes the entirety of the passage from the *2nd Letter*, including both the better-known ‘Three Kings’ portion of the text (312e1-4) and *also* the subsequent account of the genesis of evil in the soul (312e4-313a6),³⁴ and then proceeds to claim that it was “upon encountering these [words]” (τούτοις περιτυχών)³⁵ that Valentinus himself developed his tripartite hierarchy consisting of (i) the First principle (the Deep), (ii) the aeons of the Pleroma, and (iii) everything else beneath the Pleroma.³⁶ Finally, the extant Platonizing Sethian apocalypses *Zostrianos* (*NHC* VIII,1) and *Allogenes* (*NHC* XI,3)—homonymous with those known to Plotinus’ circle—describe a tripartition of

30 For an overview of the Middle Platonic interpretations of the *2nd Letter*, see especially Saffrey and Westerink (1974), pp. xx-lix.

31 H. Dörrie (1970).

32 Justin *Apologia I*, 60.7; Origen *Contra Celsum* (n.b., quoting Celsus) VI.18.7-10, 19.10-12; Clement of Alexandria *Protrepticus* 6.68.5-7; Eusebius *Praeparatio evangelica* XI.20.2.1-5.

33 According to H. Saffrey and L. Westerink (1974) pp. xxvi-xxxv, Moderatus’ doctrine of three Ones (*apud* Simplicius, *In Phys.* 230.34-231.12 Diels) depends upon the ‘Three Kings.’ The earliest direct quotation occurs in Apuleius *Apologia* 3644.

34 Interestingly, if I am not mistaken, the TLG suggests this passage of Hippolytus is the only more or less direct quotation of entire latter portion of the text of the *2nd Letter*, 312e4-313a6 anywhere in the Greek corpus.

35 J. Mansfeld (1992) 204-207 argues against the accuracy of Hippolytus’ claim of direct influence from the letter on Valentinus, since it is in line with his polemic strategy of tracing all heresy back to Greek philosophical antecedents. Given the amount of Neopythagorean doctrine self-evidently embedded within the Valentinian system, however, there is little reason to doubt the letter played some role; indeed, H.-J. Krämer (1964) 251 treats Hippolytus’ report as reliable.

36 Hippolytus *Refutatio* VI.37.5.4-6.1 [Marcovich]: Τούτοις περιτυχών Οὐαλεντίνος ὑπεστήσατο τὸν πάντων βασιλεία, ὃν ἔφη <ὁ> Πλάτων οὕτως, Πατέρα καὶ Βυθὸν καὶ παστ<ήν> καὶ πη>γὴν τῶν ὅλων αἰώνων.

the Barbelo Aeon into three modalities, or subaeons—respectively Kalyptos, Protophanes, and Autogenes—on the basis of a system very similar to that of Numenius, who is known to have alluded (fr. 22 Des Places) to the ‘Three Kings’ in support of a tripartition of the intellect.³⁷ This suggests an influence of the *2nd Letter* (312e1-4) upon Platonizing Sethians either directly, or indirectly through the mediation of Numenius or some similar figure.³⁸

11. It therefore appears quite plausible that along with the ‘Three Kings’ portion of the passage, the discussion of the origin of evil in the soul at *2nd Letter* 312e4-313a6 was a significant source for the various Gnostic myths involving Sophia’s cognitive overreach and failure. At this point I would like to present the second hypothesis of this paper, which is as follows. I suspect that for certain Gnostic thinkers, especially the Platonizing Sethians closest to Plotinus, this passage also served, along with *Phaedrus* 248a-b, as an important source for the doctrine of the *individual* soul, concerning both its fall and its subsequent salvation, which was envisioned as (in some sense) parallel to the fall and restoration of Sophia. The theme of cognitive overreach and failure plays a central role in *Zostrianos*, which explains the fall into incarnation of the living Sethian elect precisely as the result of the noble but failed attempt of their pre-incarnate souls to attain the transcendent principles *beyond* the intelligible realm without divine assistance.³⁹ In the Zostrianian conception, salvation of an elect soul that happens to be ensnared in a body can only occur when it rediscovers within itself certain salvific powers described as impressions (*typoi*) or thoughts (*noêmata*) that assist in the ascent.⁴⁰ More importantly, however, we may be able to detect an allusion to the specifically cautionary theme of 312e4-313a6 in the related Platonizing Sethian tractate *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3), in the course of an extremely difficult passage embedded within a longer negative-theological revelation:

37 Proclus reports that Numenius (fr. 22 Des Places) alluded to the ‘Three Kings’ in support of a tripartition of the intellect into [1] the “Living Being *that is*” of *Timaeus* 39e (i.e., the repository of all Forms), [2] the *nous* proper that contemplates, and [3] a demiurgic intellect that thinks discursively. Proclus also reports that Amelius, apparently following Numenius, interpreted ‘Plato’s ‘Three Kings’ to imply three intellects: one that *is*, one that *has*, and one that *sees*. At 11.9[33].1.12-63, Plotinus himself confirms that the Gnostics postulate a tripartite intellect (lest anyone suspect Plotinian influence on the Platonizing Sethians).

38 In support of the latter possibility, see L. Brisson (1999).

39 See Z. Mazur, “Traces of the Competition,” (forthcoming).

40 *Zostrianos* (NHC VIII,1) 46.15-31.

If (one should claim that one sees) the manner in which (the unknowable deity) is unknowable, or that one sees the manner in which he (i.e., the deity) exists in every respect, or one should claim that he (i.e., the deity) exists *as something like knowledge* (*n-t-he n-ou-gnôsis*), then one has committed an impiety against him, and for this person there is condemnation because he did not know God. He will not be condemned by that (deity, since the latter) does not have concern about anything, nor does he have any desire, but rather (the person) will be (condemned) by himself because he has not found the truly existing principle. He (i.e., the person) was blind apart from the ‘eye of revelation’ that is at rest, that which is activated from the triple power of the First Thought of the Invisible Spirit.⁴¹

12. If my interpretation of this grammatically problematic passage is correct, the sense is that if one should claim to possess knowledge of what the hyper-transcendent deity is *like*—or, in other words, if one should attempt to know the incomparable through *comparison*—one commits thereby a grave impiety and therefore receives judgement, just as in the *2nd Letter* 312e4-313a6, the soul begets evil when it seeks to comprehend the first principles through an inquiry into their *kind* (πῶς). *Allogenes* then goes on to insist that the aspirant is “blind”—i.e., is unable to apprehend the supreme Unknowable—in the absence of a particular divinely-bestowed faculty of transcendental apprehension—referred to here as an “eye of revelation”⁴²—whose nature is supposedly revealed by the text of *Allogenes* itself. It would therefore appear that according to the Platonizing Sethian interpretation of the *2nd Letter*, any attempt to attain the First principle(s) is doomed to suffer a catastrophic failure *without* the revelation and/or faculty of transcendental apprehension that is unique to the Platonizing Sethians themselves.

13. Indeed, support for this hypothesis may be found in Plotinus himself, to whom we now return. It is well known that Plotinus adduces the ‘Three Kings’

41 *Allogenes* (NHC XI,3) 64.14-36. Note that my translation here—of the BCNH ed. Coptic text in W.-P. Funk *et al.* (2004)—differs slightly from those of other translators. There is an evident grammatical problem in the text: specifically, a lack of a necessary verb in the conditional phrase beginning on line 14, which has led all editors to suspect a line of text has been accidentally omitted. Both NHL and BCNH translators supply “sees” from line 16, but it makes more sense in this context to imagine a verb of *saying*, hence my “would claim,” which anticipates the verb *najoos* (the future of “to say,”) on line 19.

42 The origin of the “eye” is in part Platonic as well, deriving from the eye of the soul at *Republic* 533d2 (cf. also *Sophist* 254a10).

as the ostensible Platonic foundation for his doctrine of three principles (One, Intellect, and Soul). He quotes directly from the ‘Three Kings’ portion of the passage three times, in his 10th, 38th, and 51st treatises,⁴³ and he suggestively alludes⁴⁴ to this source text in many other places throughout his corpus.⁴⁵ And yet, despite the importance of the ‘Three Kings’ for Plotinus, he never makes a clear reference to the latter portion of the passage concerning the genesis of evil; in their *index fontium* Henry and Schwyzer suggest only one citation from 312e4-313a6, at v.3[49].17.16, where Plotinus mentions only the “painful laboring” (ὠδίνειν) of a hypothetical soul which strives after the One.⁴⁶ However, Plotinus’ reticence on this latter portion of the passage does not prevent him from *alluding* to it repeatedly. Throughout his corpus one can find recurrent traces of a tacit engagement with this portion of this passage: an engagement motivated, I believe, by his awareness of its problematic Gnostic interpretation. Indeed, I would suggest that Plotinus found the passage embarrassing in the first place because of its apparent justification of a Gnostic doctrine of the fall of the Soul and thus of the divine origin of evil: a doctrine that—despite his own proximity to Gnostic thought—he explicitly rejects, and which comprises the single most central issue that distinguishes his own view from theirs.⁴⁷ That Plotinus closely associates the ‘Three Kings’ with the issue of the soul’s evil can be discerned from examination of the context of his explicit quotations of the first part of the passage (312e1-4). Thus, for example, Plotinus’ very first such explicit quotation occurs in v.1[10], a treatise which famously opens with the question of why the individual soul falls into birth and comes

43 At v.1[10].8.1-4; v.1.7[38].42.9-10, 15-20; and 1.8[51].2.28-32.

44 He often coyly mentions “firsts,” “seconds,” and “thirds” without the more specific terminology of kingship.

45 In the *index fontium*, Henry and Schwyzer suggest also iv.7[2].13.16; v.4[7].1.3-5; iii.9[13].7.3; vi.4[22].11.9; vi.5[23].4.21, 24; v.5[32].3.3-4; vi.7[38].42.3-6; vi.8[39].9.18-23; and iii.5[50].8.8; other instances they seem to have missed include, surely *inter alia*, v.6[24].4.14-17, and, in the central anti-Gnostic treatise itself, ii.9[33].13.3-4.

46 v.3[49].17.15-17: ἡ ἔτι ἢ ψυχὴ ὠδίνει καὶ μᾶλλον. ἴσως οὖν χρὴ αὐτὴν ἡδὴ γεννήσαι ἀίξασαν πρὸς αὐτὸ πληρωθεῖσαν ὠδίνων. / “... the soul still has even greater birth-pangs. Perhaps at this point she must give birth, having eagerly glanced towards it and having been filled with birth-pangs.”

47 The Gnostics interpret pseudo-Plato to locate the root of evil in a cognitive failure of the soul, individual or universal. Plotinus, at least in his later period, firmly disagrees; in his view the responsibility for evil in the soul is always due to matter, whether matter is generated by the soul itself at the ultimate limit of being—as maintained by O’Brien, e.g. in O’Brien (1993)—or whether matter is extruded from the One as a by-product of the very first moment of procession, as maintained by J.-M. Narbonne (2007; 2011).

to be evil in the first place.⁴⁸ Plotinus goes on to make a robust defense of the divinity of the individual soul, which culminates in the literal quotation of the ‘Three Kings’ at the beginning of chapter 8. A subtext running through the entirety of the treatise—whose very title (according to Porphyry), *On the three Principal Hypostases*, alludes to the Three Kings—appears to be an almost anxious defense of the soul in response to the entire passage from the *2nd Letter*. Similarly, in 1.8[51].2—a treatise entirely devoted to exculpating the cosmic Soul from the generation of evil—the ‘Three Kings’ quotation occurs immediately after he has insisted that the hypostatic Intellect and Soul are free of evil and are “unharméd” or “without sorrow” (ἀπήμων: 1.8[51].2.26), thus tacitly opposing the Gnostic interpretation of the latter portion of the passage in terms of cognitive failure, passion, and evil among the aeons.

14. Perhaps more importantly, however, another aspect of *2nd Letter* 312e4-313a6 that Plotinus would have found troubling is that it provides putative Platonic authority for the Platonizing Sethian claim that the human soul is simply *incapable* of undertaking an ascent to the first principles: incapable, that is, without the specific revelations that only Platonizing Sethians can provide. For Plotinus, the contemplative ascent to the One is a fundamental goal and, in theory, is accessible to anyone. We may recall that in 11.9[33], Plotinus repeatedly takes the Gnostics to task for what he perceives is the arrogance of their claim to possess some unique capability to undertake contemplative ascent,⁴⁹ and thus to “rank themselves alone next to God.”⁵⁰ So annoyed is Plotinus with what he sees as his Gnostic friends’ hubris that at one point he chides them sarcastically by paraphrasing the Gnostics’ own admonitions: “One is able to go as far as Intellect leads, but to go above Intellect is immediately to fall outside of it.”⁵¹ This seemingly hypocritical⁵² admonition is an unmistakable echo of

48 V.1 [10]. 1.1-6: Τί ποτε ἄρα ἐστὶ τὸ πεποιηκὸς τὰς ψυχὰς πατρὸς θεοῦ ἐπιλαθέσθαι, καὶ μοίρας ἐκέλευεν οὐσας καὶ ἔλως ἐκείνου ἀγνοῆσαι καὶ ἑαυτὰς καὶ ἐκείνον; Ἀρχὴ μὲν οὖν αὐταῖς τοῦ κακοῦ ἡ τόλμα καὶ ἡ γένεσις καὶ ἡ πρώτη ἑτερότης καὶ τὸ βουληθῆναι δὲ ἑαυτῶν εἶναι. “What is it which has made the souls forget the Father, and—even though they are from there and entirely belong to him—be ignorant of both themselves and of him? For the origin of evil for them is audacity and birth and the first alterity and wishing [to belong] to themselves.”

49 E.g. 11.9[33].9.75-83; 18.30-38. See **Endnote 5**.

50 11.9[33].9.45-49: Ἐπειτα σεμνὸν δεῖ εἰς μέτρον μετὰ οὐκ ἀγροικίας, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἰόντα ἐφ’ ὅσον ἡ φύσις δύναται ἡμῶν, ἀνιέναι, τοῖς δ’ ἄλλοις νομίζειν εἶναι χώραν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ καὶ μὴ αὐτὸν μόνον μετ’ ἐκείνον τάξαντα.

51 11.9[33].9.51-52: δύναται δὲ εἰς ὅσον νοῦς ἀγει· τὸ δ’ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἡδὴ ἐστὶν ἔξω νοῦ πεσεῖν.

52 Plotinus himself claims to surpass the Intellect during his contemplative ascent to the One; see the clearest example at VI.7[38].22.19-20: (the soul of the aspirant) νοῦ μὲν ὑπεραίρει, οὐ δύναται δὲ ὑπὲρ τὸ ἀγαθὸν δραμεῖν.

a statement about Sophia in Clement's *Excerpta ek Theodoto*, itself ultimately drawn from the *2nd Letter*: "The aeon (i.e., Sophia) who wished to grasp that which is above knowledge came to be in ignorance and shapelessness."⁵³ We may now discern the *2nd Letter* tacitly underlying this debate.

15. Yet this point may be made more forcefully. It seems to me that once one has been attuned to its subtle resonances, one can begin to discern traces throughout Plotinus' oeuvre of his debate with the Gnostics *specifically* over the epistemology implied by *2nd Letter* 312e4-313a6. As one might expect, this is especially evident throughout the anti-Gnostic tetralogy (the so-called *Großschrift*), in which the question of how it is *possible* for the soul to contemplate the Intellect and the One recurs almost as a leitmotif.⁵⁴ Yet the debate with the Gnostics over the prerequisites for contemplative ascent is evident already in the first treatise in which he explicitly mentions the 'Three Kings,' v.1[10]. In the opening chapter of the treatise Plotinus defends the adequacy of the human soul to engage in an investigation of the first principles, tacitly responding to the claim of the *2nd Letter* that the soul is incapable of doing so without catastrophic consequences:

That which investigates is the soul, and it must know for itself what it is that it investigates, so that it should learn first of all about itself, whether it has the power to seek things of such a kind, and if it has the kind of 'eye' that is (able to) see, and if the investigation is proper. For if (the objects of investigation) are alien, what must one do? And if they are akin, then it is both proper (to investigate them), and possible to discover (them).⁵⁵

Significantly, this passage—which echoes the exact terminology of *2nd Letter* 212e4-313a6⁵⁶—appears to be the introduction of an extensive response to the passage of *Allogenes* 64 quoted above, implying an affirmation that every soul has an "eye" capable of apprehending the transcendentia.⁵⁷ In the remaining chapters of the treatise Plotinus goes on to defend the divinity of the soul and

53 Clement of Alexandria *Excerpta ek Theodoto* 31.2 [Sagnard]: 'Ο δὲ βουληθεὶς Αἰὼν τὸ ὑπὲρ τὴν Γνώσιν λαβεῖν, ἐν ἀγνωσίᾳ καὶ ἀμορφίᾳ ἐγένετο.

54 E.g., III.8[30].9.19-32; v.8[31].1.1-6, chs. 9-12 *passim*; v.5[32].4.6-11, 6.16-25; II.9[33].18.30-38.

55 Plot. v.1[10]. 1.31-35: Τὸ γὰρ ζητοῦν ἐστὶ ψυχὴ, καὶ τί ὃν ζητεῖ γνωστέον αὐτῇ, ἵνα αὐτὴν πρότερον μάθῃ, εἰ δύνανται ἔχει τοῦ τὰ τοιαῦτα ζητεῖν, καὶ εἰ ὄμμα τοιοῦτον ἔχει, οἷον ἰδεῖν, καὶ εἰ προσήκει ζητεῖν. Εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλότρια, τί δεῖ; Εἰ δὲ συγγενή, καὶ προσήκει καὶ δύναται εὐρεῖν.

56 E.g., τοιοῦτον, συγγενή.

57 The image of eye to describe the faculty of transcendental apprehension occurs also at I.6[1].9.25 and also v.1.7[38].41.1-5, preceding the full quotation of the 'Three Kings' passage in chapter 42.

its genealogical derivation from Intellect and thence from the One, and thus to demonstrate the relatively short trajectory by which the individual soul can attain the superior hypostases. At *v.1*[10].10.5-6 he even states that the human soul itself somehow possesses the three principal hypostases—that is, the ‘Three Kings’—*within itself*:⁵⁸ a remarkable claim—*itself* one with a Gnostic resonance⁵⁹—whose intention is evidently to obviate the pseudo-Platonic position, adduced by the Platonizing Sethians, to the effect that the (unaided) human soul bears insufficient kinship with these principles to be able to apprehend them without falling into evil. If this interpretation is correct, one might perceive not only in this particular passage but also in the ubiquitous passages in which Plotinus insists that the human soul possesses *by nature* something within itself that is akin to the One and that permits the ultimate transcendental apprehension,⁶⁰ a refutation of the Platonizing Sethian claim, inspired by the 2nd Letter, that a contemplative ascent to the transcendentia requires an exceptional divine revelation—to which the Platonizing Sethians claim unique access—in order to avoid catastrophic failure and condemnation.

16. In conclusion, it seems reasonable to assert that once again—as elsewhere—we find Plotinus at bitter odds with the Gnostics over a contested interpretation of Plato. What is potentially even more infuriating for Plotinus than the philosophical disagreement is that, as so often, the Gnostic interpretation, while perhaps excessively literal, nevertheless cleaves to the letter of the Platonic text more closely than does his own, even if—with respect to authorial intent, at least—it evidently misreads the source. We may thus appreciate that the Gnostics were reading Plato’s texts (or what were thought to be Plato’s texts) very insightfully and creatively, if uncharitably, and did so with the intention of exploiting certain genuinely *philosophical* problems and unexplained ‘gaps’ in his thought, such as the origin of evil for the soul, the ultimate cause of its descent into the body, and its paradoxical capacity for apprehending the first principle, that neither Plato himself nor his academic successors had adequately explained. The significance of these Gnostic interpretations can be appreciated from the degree to which Plotinus was obligated to contort his own positions so as to distinguish his thought from theirs.

58 *v.1*[10].10.5-6: Ὡςπερ δὲ ἐν τῇ φύσει τριττὰ ταῦτά ἐστι τὰ εἰρημένα, οὕτω χρὴ νομίζειν καὶ παρ’ ἡμῖν ταῦτα εἶναι. / “Just as in nature there are *these three things mentioned*, thus one must admit these things are *also with us*.”

59 See Z. Mazur (2013).

60 E.g., *v.1.9*[9].3.20-22, 4.27-28; *111.8*[30].9.22; *v.1.7*[38].31.8; *v.1.8*[39].15.14-21.

Endnotes

Endnote 1

Already in his second treatise, at IV.7[2].13.2-8, Plotinus describes a schism between one part of the Soul that is intellectual and dispassionate (*apathes*) and thus remains eternally within the Intellect, and another part that “acquires desire”—apparently desire to imitate the Intellect—and on this account is extruded from the Intellect so as to undertake demiurgy; thus IV.7[2].13.2-8: “Οτι, ὅσος μὲν νοῦς μόνος, ἀπαθὴς ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς ζῶν μόνον νοεράν ἔχων ἐκεῖ ἀεὶ μένει—οὐ γὰρ ἐν ὁρμῇ οὐδ’ ὄρεξις—δ’ ἂν ὄρεξιν προσλάβῃ ἐφεξῆς ἐκείνῳ τῷ νῷ ὄν, τῇ προσθήκῃ τῆς ὀρέξεως οἷον πρόεισιν ἤδη ἐπιπλέον καὶ κοσμεῖν ὀρεγόμενον καθὰ ἐν νῷ εἶδεν, ὥσπερ κυοῦν ἀπ’ αὐτῶν καὶ ὠδίνον γεννήσαι, ποιεῖν σπεύδει καὶ δημιουργεῖ. / “For on the one hand, as much [of the soul is] Intellect alone has intelligence and remains there eternally—for in it is neither impulse nor desire—but on the other hand, that which acquires desire—coming next in order immediately after that Intellect by means of the accretion of the desire—proceeds (as it were) still further, and—desiring to set things in order according to what it saw in Intellect, as if pregnant from these things and coming to be in labor—it strives to create, and then undertakes demiurgy.” Similarly, in a much-debated passage of his thirteenth treatise, Plotinus maintains that the Soul’s failed attempt to attain itself—its point of contact with the Intellect—causes it to create an obscure and irrational ‘image’ of itself, which presumably means that it generates either bodies or matter; thus III.9[13].3.9-14: Τοῦτο δὲ ποιεῖ, ὅταν πρὸς αὐτήν· πρὸς αὐτήν γὰρ βουλομένη τὸ μετ’ αὐτήν ποιεῖ εἰδῶλον αὐτῆς, τὸ μὴ ὄν, οἷον κενεμβρατούσα καὶ ἀοριστοτέρα γινομένη· καὶ τούτου τὸ εἰδῶλον τὸ ἀόριστον πάντῃ σκοτεινόν· ἄλογον γὰρ καὶ ἀνόητον πάντῃ καὶ πολὺ τοῦ ὄντος ἀποστατοῦν. / “It does this when it [goes] towards itself. For wishing [to go] towards itself, it creates [instead] a reflection of itself, *after* itself, that which is non-being, as if ‘walking on the void’ and becoming the most indefinite of all, and because of this the indefinite reflection is entirely dark. For it is irrational and completely unintelligent and stands very far outside of being.” And despite the fact that treatises written after the putative Gnostic ‘crisis’ of Plotinus’ middle period tend to absolve the Soul by redirecting the attribution of evil to matter itself—pointed out by Narbonne 2007—one can find intimations of this type of striving and failure on the part of the Soul well into his later period; thus, in the explanation of the Soul’s generation of time in his 45th treatise, at III.7[45].11.15-20: Φύσεως δὲ πολυπράγμονος καὶ ἄρχειν αὐτῆς βουλομένης καὶ εἶναι αὐτῆς καὶ τὸ πλεόν τοῦ παρόντος ζητεῖν ἐλομένης ἐκινήθη μὲν αὐτή, ἐκινήθη δὲ καὶ αὐτός, καὶ εἰς τὸ ἔπειτα ἀεὶ καὶ τὸ ὕστερον καὶ οὐ

ταυτόν, ἀλλ' ἕτερον εἶθ' ἕτερον κινούμενοι, μήκός τι τῆς πορείας ποιησάμενοι αἰώνος εἰκόνα τὸν χρόνον εἰργάσμεθα / “Because [Soul] has a restless nature and wants to rule herself and to be herself, and *she chose to search for more than what is present* [to her], she moved, and [time] itself also moved.”

Endnote 2

As early as his 9th treatise, we read that the prenoetic efflux of the One, “*wishing to be one but not being one . . . dared* (τολμήσας) to stand away from” its source in the One VI.9[9].5.24-29: Τὸ δὴ πρὸ τοῦ ἐν τοῖς οὐσι τιμιωτάτου, εἶπερ δεῖ τι πρὸ νοῦ εἶναι ἐν μὲν εἶναι βουλομένου, οὐκ ὄντος δὲ ἑν, ἐνοειδοῦς δέ, ὅτι αὐτῷ μηδὲ ἐσκέδασται ὁ νοῦς, ἀλλὰ σύνεστιν ἑαυτῷ ὄντως οὐ διαρτήσας ἑαυτὸν τῷ πλησίον μετὰ τὸ ἐν εἶναι, ἀποστήναι δέ πως τοῦ ἐνὸς τολμήσας / “That very thing that is prior to the most honorable thing among the intelligibles, if it is necessary that there be something prior to the intellect that wishes to be one, but is not one, but is rather in ‘one-ish form,’ because Intellect is not dispersed in itself, but truly is together with itself, not having divided itself because of its proximity after the One, but it somehow dared to stand away from the One.” Also: III.8[30].8.31-38: Ἐπεὶ καὶ ὅταν τὸ ἐν θεωρῇ, οὐχ ὡς ἑν· εἰ δὲ μή, οὐ γίνεται νοῦς. Ἀλλὰ ἀρξάμενος ὡς ἑν οὐχ ὡς ἥρξατο ἔμεινεν, ἀλλ' ἔλαθεν ἑαυτὸν πολλὺς γενόμενος, οἷον βεβαρημένος, καὶ ἐξείλιξεν αὐτὸν πάντα ἔχειν θέλων—ὡς βέλτιον ἦν αὐτῷ μὴ ἐθελῆσαι τοῦτο, δευτέρου γὰρ ἐγένετο—οἷον γὰρ κύκλος ἐξελίζας αὐτὸν γέγονε καὶ σχῆμα καὶ ἐπίπεδον καὶ περιφέρεια καὶ κέντρον καὶ γραμμαὶ καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄνω, τὰ δὲ κάτω. / “Since also when it contemplates the One it is not as one; if not, it would not become Intellect. But beginning as one, it did not remain as it began, but unaware of itself, became multiple, as it were, weighted down, and unravelled itself wanting to have everything—as it was better for it not to have wanted this, [for] it became the second—like a circle unravelling itself it became shape and surface and circumference and center-point and lines, both those above and those below.” VI.7[38].15.20-23: Δύναμιν οὖν εἰς τὸ γεννᾶν εἶχε παρ' ἐκείνου καὶ τῶν αὐτοῦ πληροῦσθαι γεννημάτων διδόντος ἐκείνου ἃ μὴ εἶχεν αὐτός. Ἀλλ' ἐξ ἐνὸς αὐτοῦ πολλὰ τούτῳ ἦν γὰρ ἐκομίζετο δύναμιν ἀδυνατῶν ἔχειν συνέθραυε καὶ πολλὰ ἐποίησε τὴν μίαν, ἵν' οὕτω δύναιτο κατὰ μέρος φέρειν. / “And so [Intellect] had, from that [the Good], the power to generate, and to be filled (or: “pregnant”) with his offspring, since that [Good] gives what he himself [the Good] does not have. But from his [the Good's] unity are many for him [Intellect]. For it was unable to hold the power it received; it broke it into pieces and made the one power many, so that it would be able to bear it part by part.” VI.7[38].16.10-14: Ἄρα, ὅτε ἐώρα πρὸς τὸ ἀγαθόν, ἐνόει ὡς πολλὰ τὸ ἐν ἐκείνῳ καὶ ἐν ὃν αὐτὸς ἐνόει αὐτὸν πολλὰ, μερίζων αὐτὸν παρ' αὐτῷ τῷ νοεῖν μὴ ὅλον ὁμοῦ δύνασθαι; Ἀλλ' οὕτω νοῦς ἦν ἐκείνῳ βλέπων, ἀλλ' ἔβλεπεν ἀνοήτως. / “Did it, when it was looking towards the

Good, think that one as many, and he himself “One-Being,” think him as many, dividing him in himself by not being able to think the whole at once? But it was not yet Intellect while it was looking at that, but looked unintellectually.” VI.8[39].18.26-30: ... τῆς νοερᾶς περιθεούσης δυνάμεως, τὸ οἶον ἰνδάλματος αὐτοῦ ἀρχέτυπον, ἐν ἐνὶ νοῦν, πολλοῖς καὶ εἰς πολλὰ οἶον νενικημένου καὶ νοῦ διὰ ταῦτα γενομένου, ἐκείνου πρὸ νοῦ μείναντος <ἐκ> τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ νοῦν γεννήσαντος / “... while an intellectual power is running around it, is, as it were, an archetype of his image, the Intellect in One, as it were defeated by and into many, and by means of these things becoming Intellect, as he remains before Intellect, generating Intellect from its power.” V.3[49].11.1-8: Διὸ καὶ ὁ νοῦς οὗτος ὁ πολὺς, ὅταν τὸ ἐπέκεινα ἐθέλῃ νοεῖ, ἐν μὲν οὖν αὐτὸ ἐκείνο, ἀλλ’ ἐπιθάλλειν θέλων ὡς ἀπλῶ ἔξεισιν ἄλλο ἀεὶ λαμβάνων ἐν αὐτῷ πληθυνόμενον· ὥστε ὥρμησε μὲν ἐπ’ αὐτὸ οὐχ ὡς νοῦς, ἀλλ’ ὡς ὅψις οὐπω ἰδοῦσα, ἐξῆλθε δὲ ἔχουσα ὅπερ αὐτὴ ἐπλήθυνεν. / “So this multiple Intellect, when it wishes to think the Transcendent (that one itself [being] one), but wishing to blossom as if simple, it comes out eternally grasping another, multiplied in itself; so that it moved to it not as Intellect, but as vision not yet seeing, and came out having that which the vision multiplied.”

Endnote 3

Although it is not the primary purpose of this paper, it might be useful to consider precisely how, in my view, Plotinus has adapted and corrected the Gnostic schema. The Gnostic systems themselves generally introduce a discrete distinction between, on the one hand, the generation through successful contemplation on the first two strata, and, on the other hand, the catastrophic failure of contemplation on the 3rd stratum, so as to explain the origin of the lower strata while exculpating the transcendentia from deliberate or intentional involvement in their generation. Moreover, these schemata attempt to provide a compelling account of the genesis of the profoundly mediocre cosmos by positing a modality of generation that is inferior still, on the subsequent level, in which, by contrast with the natural or automatic processes on the superior strata, the Demiurge must deliberately, artificially, and laboriously fashion the cosmos as an *n*-th generation material copy of the Forms, which he can barely perceive at all. In reaction to this schema, therefore, Plotinus adopts both the positive and the negative models of procession—that is, both the successful contemplative generation *and* the decline through contemplative or reproductive failure—at *every* level of his system, so as to establish a continuous hierarchy from the One to the very lowest limit of being; he also completely eliminates any deliberate calculation or artificial demiurgy from his conception of cosmogony. That is to say, he characterizes hypostatic procession *both* in terms of successful contemplative generation—which, as

he insists—especially in the anti-Gnostic context of III.8[30]—extends all the way down to the last phase, the generation of the physical cosmos and bodies—and also, *simultaneously* in terms of *decline* through contemplative or reproductive *failure*, a hint of which can be detected even, as we have seen, at the very first moment of procession from the One. Indeed, even the more pessimistic model, in which the dynamic efflux of each hypostasis *fails* to re-attain its source, is itself a mechanism for preserving theodicy, since, one might say, its aspiration is always oriented upwards, towards its superior. Thus Plotinus can explain the existence of ontological difference while nevertheless avoiding the introduction of a discrete rupture of the sort posited by the Gnostics, one that would constitute (in his view) an unacceptable discontinuity in the hierarchy of being.

Endnote 4

The clearest example occurs at I.8[51].14.51-54, in the course of an argument tacitly refuting the Gnostic position that the Soul is responsible for evil since it is she who generates matter—itsself virtually equivalent to evil—when her own cognitive failure causes her to experience passion. Plotinus embeds this in a contrafactual phrase: καὶ γὰρ εἰ αὐτὴ ἡ ψυχὴ τὴν ὕλην ἐγέννησε παθοῦσα, καὶ εἰ ἐκοινωνήσεν αὐτῇ καὶ ἐγένετο κακὴ, ἡ ὕλη αἰτία παροῦσα· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐγένετο εἰς αὐτὴν μὴ τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτῆς τὴν γένεσιν λαβοῦσα / “For even if Soul itself had generated matter *when it experienced passion*, and if by communing with [matter] also became evil, matter, by being present, is the cause [of evil]; for [the soul] would not have come into matter unless [soul] had its birth by means of the presence [of matter].” Yet Plotinus has already alluded to the same doctrine earlier, in the course of his anti-Gnostic tetralogy, at II.9[33].2.10-12, when he admits that the cosmic Soul experiences a certain passion as it does not remain united with the hypostatic Soul, but nevertheless remains “undisturbed,” acting upon the cosmos through a kind of successful contemplation: καὶ τοῦτο συμβαίνει αὐτῇ τὸ πάθος ὅτι μὴ ἔμεινεν ἐν τῷ καλλίστῳ, ὅπου ψυχὴ μείνασα ἢ μὴ μέρος, μηδὲ ἥς ἡμεῖς ἔτι μέρος... / “This passion (πάθος) that [Sophia / the Soul] undergoes is because she did not remain in the most beautiful, where the Soul that is not a part remains...”. We may even detect an allusion to the same doctrine earlier in his anti-Gnostic tetralogy, at III.8[30].4.11-14, in Plotinus’ playful impersonation of Nature herself. Plotinus has Nature insist that her own experience of passion is no worse than that of her mother (Soul) or even (she implies) her more venerable ancestors (the superior hypostases), all of whom undertake successful contemplative generation that unfolds on successive strata: Καὶ μοι τὸ τῆς μητρὸς καὶ τῶν γειναμένων ὑπάρχει πάθος· καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοί εἰσιν ἐκ θεωρίας καὶ ἡ γένεσις ἢ ἐμὴ ἐκείνων οὐδὲν πραξάντων, ἀλλ’ ὄντων

μειζόνων λόγων καὶ θεωρούντων αὐτοὺς ἐγὼ γεγέννημαι. / “The suffering (πάθος) that is mine also befalls my mother and those who brought me into being, for they also come from contemplation, and my genesis is from them, not from actions, but they are greater *logoi*, and while they contemplate themselves, I come into being.” It would seem that Plotinus’ intention here, in his apparent concession that cosmic Soul experiences passion, is to short-circuit the discrete Gnostic division between the successful contemplation of the superior aeons and the failed contemplation of the inferior principles responsible for the physical cosmos (Sophia and the Demiurge). He has thus transmuted the Gnostic conception of divine passion—which is unthinkable in a traditional Platonist context—into an anodyne metaphor suitable even to describe procession among the superior hypostases. And yet the deep structure of the Gnostic schema nevertheless may be discerned underlying the entirety of his conception of procession.

Endnote 5

11.9[33].9.75-83: τιμῶν δὲ ἐκάστους κατ’ ἀξίαν, σπεύδων δ’ αἰεὶ οὐ πάντα σπεύδει τὰ δυνάμενα—πολλὰ δὲ εἶναι τὰ σπεύδοντα ἐκεῖ [πάντα], καὶ τὰ μὲν τυγχάνοντα μακάρια, τὰ δὲ ὡς δυνατὸν ἔχει τὴν προσήκουσαν αὐτοῖς μοῖραν—οὐχ αὐτῷ μόνῳ διδοὺς τὸ δύνασθαι· οὐ γάρ, ἢ ἐπαγγέλλει, τὸ ἔχειν, ὃ λέγει τις ἔχειν, ἀλλὰ πολλὰ καὶ εἰδότες ὅτι μὴ ἔχουσι, λέγουσιν ἔχειν καὶ οἴονται ἔχειν οὐκ ἔχοντες καὶ μόνοι ἔχειν, ὃ αὐτοὶ μόνοι οὐκ ἔχουσι. / “[The man who truly loves God] honors each one according to his worth, and always strives towards that to which all who are able strive—for many are striving there, and some who are blessed, attain it, while others have the share appropriate to their ability—while not according himself alone that ability. For it is not by proclaiming to have what one claims to have that one has it, yet many things that they too know they do not have, they say that they have, while not having them, and [they say that] they alone [have] what they alone do not have.” 11.9[33].18.30-38: Ἐγγὺς δὲ γενόμενοι τοῦ ἀπλήκτου μιμοίμεθ’ ἂν τὴν τοῦ σύμπαντος ψυχὴν καὶ τὴν τῶν ἀστρῶν, εἰς ἐγγύτητα δὲ ὁμοιότητος ἐλθόντες σπεύδοιμεν ἂν πρὸς τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ ἂν ἐν θεᾷ καὶ ἡμῖν εἴη ἅτε καλῶς καὶ αὐτοῖς παρεσκευασμένοις φύσεσι καὶ ἐπιμελείαις· τοῖς δὲ ἐξ ἀρχῆς ὑπάρχει. Οὐ δὲ, εἰ μόνοι λέγοιεν θεωρεῖν δύνασθαι, πλέον ἂν θεωρεῖν αὐτοῖς γίνοιτο, οὐδ’ ὅτι αὐτοῖς φασιν εἶναι ἐξελθεῖν ἀποθανοῦσι, τοῖς δὲ μὴ, αἰεὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν κοσμοῦσιν. / “Having come close to an undisturbed condition, we might imitate the condition of the soul of the entirety and that of the stars; having come into proximity by similarity, we could hasten towards the same thing [as the stars] and [attain] the same things through vision, and we would be beautifully prepared even for those [elevated things] by nature and by exercises; but [contemplation] belongs to them [the stars] ‘from the beginning.’ Even if *they* [the

Gnostics] declare themselves the only ones able to contemplate, there would not be more for them to contemplate, nor would there be if they declare themselves to be able to exit [the cosmos] when they die, while others [the celestial bodies] are not, as they eternally decorate the sky.”

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